DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 998 FL 022 740

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TITLE Teaching Chinese Characters: Some Practical Methods.
PUB DATE 17 Nov 92
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (26th, Rosemont, IL, November 20-22, 1992).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Usé - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; Classroom Techniques; *Cultural Awareness; Games; *Ideography; Language Tests; *Reading Instruction; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Semantics; Testing; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

It is recommended that students of Chinese as a second language be introduced to characters corresponding to new vocabulary, rather than be taught to recognize characters after the words themselves are learned. An approach that breaks each character into its smallest meaningful units, then reassembles them into proper position to form characters, is described. It is also proposed that the teacher incorporate cultural meanings into the instructional content, encouraging students to make associations among character elements, whole characters, and cultural connotations. Games seen as useful for reinforcing and testing listening comprehension, character recognition, and writing include pictionary, bingo, and exercises in de-construction and reconstruction of characters. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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TITLE: **TEACHING CHINESE CHARACTERS: SOME PRACTICAL METHODS**

CONVENTION: **CLTA, ACTFL CONVENTION 92, CHICAGO, IL, 11/17/1992**

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I. Introduction

I came today in the same vein as "野人獻曝 ye ren xian pu": a serf who one day accidently discovered the brilliance of sunshine and travelled thousand miles to the capital to offer this wonderful gift to the emperor. I'm here today to share this sunshine with you all.

In discussing the Chinese writing system, one always immediately imagines that there are tons of independent, unrelated characters to conquer. Both Pao-ch'en Lee (1953) and Fang-yu Wang (1963), two famous Mandarin Chinese textbook writers, concur with this viewpoint in their writings. They both stress the difficulty of too many different strokes and shapes in writing Chinese characters. This point has been shared among Mandarin language learners and language teachers. In reality, Chinese characters are similar to the English alphabet. The English alphabet consists of twenty-six phonetic building blocks and Chinese consists of approximately two hundred basic semantic building blocks. As a process, the more characters one learns, the fewer new parts one needs to learn. Once the individual parts have been acquired, it is only a matter of assembling them. It is the same as learning English. To know the twenty-six letters is only a stepping stone to literacy and to know their assembled forms is true literacy. This process is quite similar in Chinese except that knowing the basic semantic building blocks means one is already literate in Chinese. Most Chinese characters are semantically oriented. Either pictographs or ideographs, they more directly represent the concepts behind the words. Phonographic characters: part of the character indicates sound and part of the character indicates meaning, are also linked together by their semantic groups. The association between the characters and the meaning is in the character itself. This makes the learning process somewhat easier.

Some instructors believe that there is such a prodigious number of characters to learn that they should delay the process of introducing characters. This delay, they

believe, will reduce the enormous amount of learning required in acquiring four skills at the same time. However, I concur with Wang (1989) that characters should be introduced in the very beginning of the classes. Though listening and speaking are the first two skills by which a child learns his/her mother tongue, s/he does so in an environment filled with writing symbols. Although the child may achieve reading and writing in a much later stage, s/he becomes familiar with writing symbols well before actually learning to read, since we do not live in a literary vacuum (Shen, 1990). For the same reason as for first language learners, there is no harm in introducing the characters at the same time as the rest of language for students who are second language learners. In fact, if characters learning are delayed in the process, students have to learn the same vocabulary twice which can be discouraging.

II. Method

In introducing characters, teachers can use an assembling method of putting semantic building blocks into the proper position to form the characters. Each character is broke down to the smallest meaningful units. For example, the compound character, 鐘 (zhong- clock) is actually seven semantic building blocks combined. Thus, when learning this single character 鐘 , the students can also learn the characters that make it up. The teacher can start from the left, 金 (jin- gold/metal), then the right, 童 (tong- child). 童 (tong) can also break down to various blocks, 立 (li- to stand/standing), 日 (ri- sun), and 土 (tu- soil/dirt). 日 (ri) and 土 (tu) can combine to another character, 里 (li- unit for distance). It is evident that in learning the character 鐘 (zhong), the student is actually learning seven characters in total. One interesting cultural connotation is that since the sound of giving clock (送鐘 sung zhong) is the same as bid farewell to someone at one's deathbed (送終 sung zhong), it is a taboo to use this object as a gift under any circumstances. While teaching characters, teachers can also incorporate cultural elements into the materials. Another example is the character 國 (guo- country), a favorite

example of this author. A country has to have a boundary: □ (wei), military force: 戈 (ge), and the people: □ (kou). The 一 (yi) under the □(kou) can be explained as the land within the boundary. It has to be under the □ (kou) since nobody walks with the land above their heads. This symbolizes what a "nation" means and requires. These semantic building blocks function the same as English affixes and suffixes, except that they are not restrained to specific positions; they can be on top, middle, bottom, right, and left. Through analytically associating their visual elements, the learning process becomes easier. This encourages students to continue their studies by building different characters into a **web of meaning** and associating them. This process will alleviate the fear a second language learners encounter in learning a new and notorious "difficult" language-Chinese.

After students have finished the learning process, teacher can make use of language games to reinforce and to test if the learning process is completed and at the same time to stimulate the interest of students. The following games except the last one are created and inspired by similar games from popular culture. They are good for recognizing and writing Chinese characters as well as practicing listening comprehension. Teachers have to make adjustment in order to accommodate the teaching process.

Pictionary can be used either at character level or at sentence level. Assigned students pick the target characters or sentences from an envelop and draw clues on a blackboard for his/her teammates to guess. This is a wonderful way to associate characters with their meaning. Other than the artists cannot make any sound, there is no limit to their imagination.

Bingo can be used to practice writing new characters covered in each chapter. Students choose characters from the designated lesson(s) and fill them in the Bingo Board. Then the teacher will pick a word from an envelope containing all the new characters of the lesson and read it out loud to the students. Students have to at least

recognize the characters and the sounds before playing.

Another good exercise that can be used to improve character recognition is to take characters apart and give clues to the construction of characters using the phrases that they have learned. For example, 也 (ye) can be described as "他的人沒有了 ta de ren meiyou le (his person is gone)", or 誰 (shei), "雞說的話 ji shuo de hua (chicken's language). Students not only have to vision how the characters are constructed but also have to practice listening comprehension. The puzzles can be based on both visual construction or on semantic construction.

An good exercise in associating characters is to ask students to add, deduct, or switch a block of character and transform the character into a different character (Lin, 1984). This exercise will help the students to strengthen their web of characters.

III. Conclusion

Our language teachers must make the language more accessible and available to our students in order to attract more students and to stay long enough to enjoy the culture behind the language. Breaking characters down to the basic semantic blocks is a way to more effectively help our students to learn. As study done by Wang and Thomas (1992) suggests: self-generate encoding will help student's retention of characters. If we can help students to build their web of characters, then students will appreciate learning this language more and the chance of their continuing studying will increase.

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